

Color and Const

Stephen Pentak has fine-tuned the creation of abstract landscape painting

By Kate Seegraves

According to American artist Chuck Close, “Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work.”

That’s a quote painter Stephen Pentak identifies with.

The Colorado-born, New York-bred artist, who is a professor emeritus at The Ohio State University and has taught there for 23 years, has been painting long enough to know what and how he wants to create. His subject: the great outdoors. His method: a tried-and-true combination of oil paints, wood panel (sometimes paper), large brushes and palette knives.

As a student – he received his bachelor’s degree in fine arts from Union College in New York and his master’s degree in fine arts from Temple University in Pennsylvania

– Pentak experimented with various styles and concepts before hitting upon abstract landscapes. At one point, he says, the bulk of his work was “minimalist geometric sculpture.”

Even then, however, nature remained a constant in his work.

“I would look to natural sources and bring in some references to the natural world. My work was highly abstract, but the underpinnings to it were these natural models and things from the world I saw around me,” he says. “(With sculpture), I thought of it as growing out the wall or a floor. It had a presence in spaces like a natural form that was rooted there. It wasn’t separated from the space by a pedestal. Even then, when it was a highly geometric structure, it still had inspiration from the natural world.”

Pentak isn’t a plein air painter: he doesn’t set up shop outdoors and paint what he sees. Rather, he works from his mind’s eye, pulling from memory the landscapes he has seen. As a kid, Pentak spent plenty of time outdoors camping and fishing. As an adult currently residing in upstate New York, Pentak still enjoys fly-fishing and hiking, and he has visited breathtaking scenery around the country and the world.

Photography plays a small role in Pentak’s painting – he some-

times uses close-up images of tree branches as visual notes for smaller, detailed vignettes – but mostly his landscapes are influenced by specific places, not mirror images of them.

The creation and combination of color plays a major role in Pentak’s work. Most often, he builds a landscape by layering paint on a panel, beginning with a yellow background and letting his paint palette dictate the piece’s overall tone.

“It’s a constant set of discoveries,” he says.

“Certain things are somewhat predictable. (With the yellow background), I know there are certain things that can happen. That way I inject something into the mix to change it, so it’s not a static recipe each time. I steer the color into a direction if there are certain things I want to evoke – certain qualities like a heavy atmosphere or a clear atmosphere – but I let the paint tell me which direction I want to go.”

The methods Pentak uses to apply paint to panel are equally significant. He manipulates large tools, from brushes to palette knives, through the paint, leaving obvious strokes and brush marks in the process.

“I mix paint, cover paint and scrape down to a color underneath, right on the surface of the painting,” he says. “The panel gives me a hard resistant surface I can scrape against.”

Pentak says he is also intuitively aware of the geometry in his application process





An exhibition of Pentak's work at The Keny Galleries will open Nov. 12 and run through Dec. 6. The 20 to 25 paintings features in the exhibition will include his riverscape paintings as well as quasi-abstract Japoniste paintings, many of which include a water background and are smaller, more intimate works. For more information about Pentak and his art, visit www.stephenpentak.com. For more information about The Keny Galleries, visit www.kenygalleries.com.



as relative to the size of the panel. He hopes the overall effect is one of absorption and awareness.

"It's really important to me that the person seeing the painting is simultaneously aware of the landscape and the marks that went into making it," he says. "One minute, they're suckered into the landscape, and then they're brought back to the surface be-



cause they see the marks. By noticing each mark, they recognize this is a construction, not a window into another world."

Public reaction to Pentak's work has been overwhelmingly positive – his work is displayed in galleries around the country, in museums such as The Columbus Museum of Art and in private collections. His work has been described

as "calm" and "peaceful," which has surprised him.

"I don't think of myself as calm," he says. "I find that an interesting contrast, but I've come to accept it."

Pentak does hope, however, that his artwork reveals a larger truth beyond simple serenity.

"The truth is how (the paintings) are made," he says. "You get to see the brushstrokes in the paint because it's a construction. Through that, you recognize in your response to the landscape that how we feel we fit into the natural world is also a constructed story we tell ourselves. It asks you to think about another level of recognition. That's one of the reasons I've never been a figure painter. The implicit figure is always the viewer." 

Kate Seegraves is contributing writer for CityScene.